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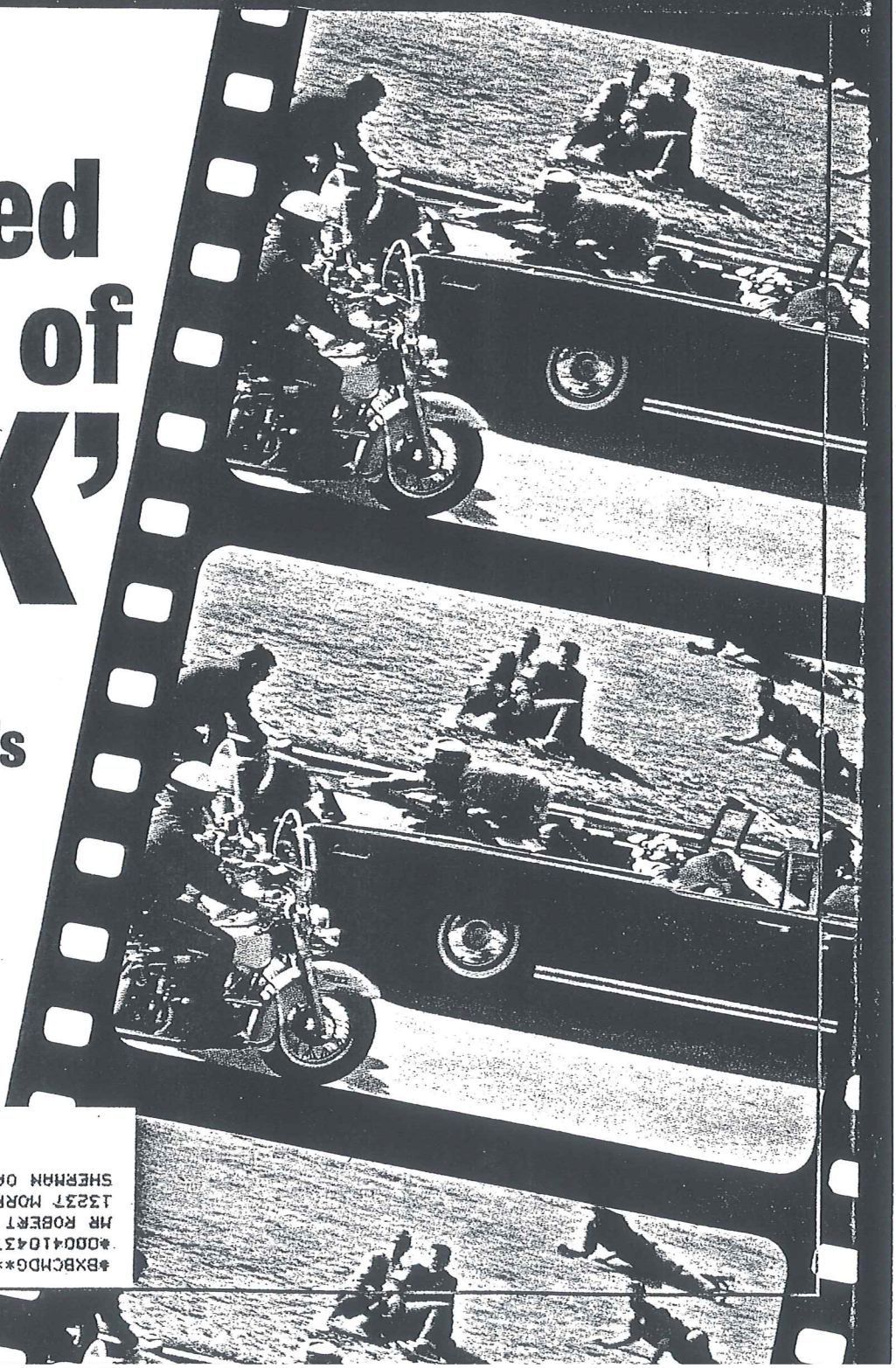
The Twisted Truth of 'JFK'

Why Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted



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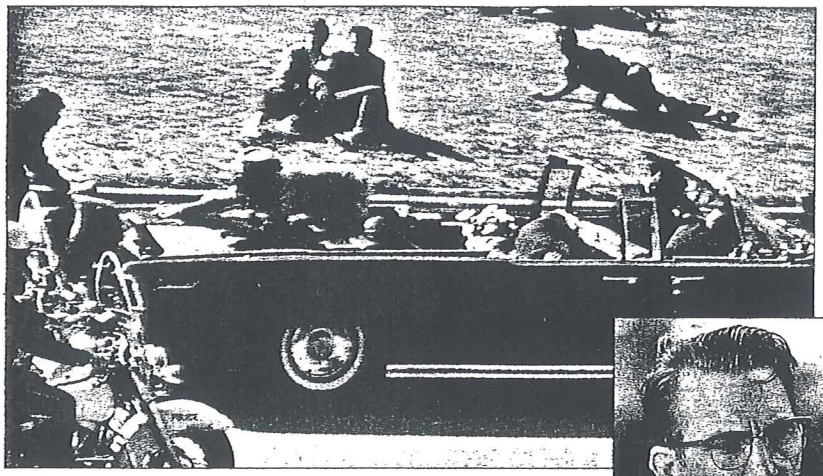

Stone's filmed re-enactment of the Kennedy assassination

Costner plays Garrison

Twisted History

Moviegoer beware. Oliver Stone's troubling epic "JFK" opens this week. A quasi documentary that mixes actual footage with re-enactments, the movie is the controversial filmmaker's attempt to re-examine events surrounding the tragic assassination of President Kennedy. Superstar Kevin Costner portrays flamboyant New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison as a stoic truth seeker. Confused audiences will wonder how much of what they've seen is fact, how much fiction. **The Arts: Page 46**

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CONVENTIONAL WISDOM WATCH

Conspiracy-Theory Edition

Was Oliver North on the Grassy Knoll? Did Castro push Robert Maxwell over the rail? Wasn't that James Earl Ray with George Bush in Paris in October 1980?

PLOTS		Conventional Wisdom
Grassy Knoll	↓	No hay there. JFK buffs have moved on to Mumbling Woman and the Three Tramps.
Oct. Surprise	↔	Sources very dubious. But CW still likes the smell of treason in the morning.
M. L. King Plot	↑	Jesse Jackson, in foreword to J. E. Ray's new book, calls for spec. prosecutor. Why not?
Pearl Harbor	↓	Did FDR know? CW's so weary of the 50th anniversary, it doesn't care anymore.
R. Maxwell	↓	Old CW: Capt. Bob killed for fortune. New CW: Capt. Crook walked his own plank.
Moon Landing	↑	Staged in a studio? Millions thought so in '69. Oliver Stone, call your office.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DOWNING—NEWSWEEK, TIM CROSBY, MAJOR LEAGUE IMAGES, TULLY—SYGMA

What Does Oliver Stone Owe History?

As Oliver Stone was putting the finishing touches on his epic "JFK" last week, he sat down with NEWSWEEK's David Ansen to defend the highly controversial perspective of the film. Some highlights from the interview:

ANSEN: What's your responsibility to history? What if you're wrong?

STONE: I would live with that. I think the artist's obligations are to interpret history and reinterpret it as he sees fit. If I did my homework, I don't feel I have a responsibility to Clay Shaw [the New Orleans businessman tried by zealous prosecutor Jim Garrison for conspiracy to kill JFK] because he was proven innocent in court. Clarence Darrow lost the Scopes trial, but that doesn't make what he did any less right.

Filmmakers make myths. They take the true meanings of events and shape them. D. W. Griffith did it in "Birth of a Nation." In "Reds," Warren Beatty probably made John Reed better than he was [but] was truthful in a mythic sense. I made Garrison better than he is for a larger purpose.

Is Clay Shaw violated by my work? Is he going to come haunt me at night, drive me to the edge of madness? I have to live with my conscience and if I have done wrong, it's going to come back on me. John Kennedy might be in my dreams, too, saying, "Do it, go out there, find my assassins, bring them to justice."

You've said that it's a mistake to idealize Kennedy. Yet the movie does just that.

Again, it was a question of do I have time in this three-hour scenario to really get into Kennedy stealing the election in '60? Or that he said one thing to the public and did another behind their backs? Those are valid points and I stand faulted on both Garrison and Kennedy. But my defense would be that there is a larger issue at stake. Ultimately, they were good guys.

Are you hoping that this film will reopen the case?

No, I don't think it will because most of the participants are dead. But the American public should demand access to the files of the House Select Committee [sealed until 2029]. And a public inquiry should get underway about the CIA. They should be reined in. They were supposed to gather intelligence originally, not practice covert operations and destabilize governments. As an intelligence-gathering apparatus, they have been sorely remiss recently on the Soviet Union as well as in Iraq and Iran. Maybe the movie can contribute to a climate for reform.

And you truly believe that if Kennedy had lived this would have been a very different world?

Totally. It would have been a much healthier place. The massacre in Southeast Asia would not have occurred. The cycles of poverty and recession were fueled by the war economy by Johnson. Inflation resulted on a massive scale. The whole economic world shifted as a result of the Vietnam War.

And it wasn't like we went over there and just lost 58,000 lives—we killed 2 million people. The CIA practiced what they had been doing in the '50s on a much larger level in Vietnam. The covert mentality continued right into the '90s. You go from Vietnam into Watergate and into the '80s with Irangate.

The forces that killed Kennedy did not operate in a vacuum. That parallel covert government has existed through the last 28 years. Lawrence Walsh couldn't bring Oliver North and that bunch to justice. It's a mentality that won't go away. One hopes the movie would make people want to strip away the lies and covert operations.

A couple of lunatics like Jim Garrison keep saying, hey, wake up, something happened. People like me, sons of Jim Garrison, promulgate the theory. I think people are more on my side than the government's. If they don't believe me this go-round, they'll believe me when another shocking thing happens.